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Phoenix

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Phoenix

Tragicomedy in Three Acts

By Lascelles Abercrombie

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• • • ὅτε πρῶτον λίπον Ἑλλάδα καλλιγύναικα,
φεύγων νείκεα πατρὸς Ἀμύντορος Ὀρμενίδαο,
ὅς μοι παλλακίδος περιχώσατο καλλικόμοιο,
τὴν αὐτὸς φιλέεσκεν, ἀτιμάζεσκε δ' ἄκοιτιν,
μητέρ' ἐμήν. ἥ δ' αἰὲν ἐμὲ λισσέσκετο γούνων
παλλακίδι προμιγῆναι, ἵν' ἐχθήρειε γέροντα.
τῇ πιθόμην καὶ ἔρεξα· πατήρ δ' ἐμὸς αὐτίκ' οἰσθεῖς
πολλὰ κατηρᾶτο, στυγερὰς δ' ἐπεκέκλετ' Ἐρινὺς,
μὴ ποτε γούνασιν οἷσιν ἐφέσσεσθαι φίλον υἱὸν
ἐξ ἐμέθεν γεγαῶτα.

ILIAD, IX.

TO
JOHN DRINKWATER

PERSONS

TWO SOLDIERS.

THE QUEEN.

AMYNTOR, the King.

RHODOPE, the bought woman.

PHOENIX, the Prince.

The ACTION is placed in a town on the coast of Northern Greece, in the times before the Trojan War.

The SCENE is the roof of the King's palace : a white marble space with a low wall round the three sides visible. Against the back wall a marble bench. The entry from the stairs up from the palace is at the front of the stage in the middle : a well with low walls on three sides, the opening facing the audience. In either corner at the back is a watch-tower, each with a narrow flight of stairs up from the roof. The back part of the stage is overspread with a blue awning, stretched just below the top of the watch-towers : so that sentinels in these, while visible to the audience, are not seen by those on the roof below. Between the back wall and the awning a view of headlands and the sea.

Phoenix

ACT I

*Afternoon. Very bright sunlight strikes the awning.
Under the awning the stage is empty : two
soldiers on duty, one in each tower.*

1ST SOLDIER. Now they have warpt her clear :
now she begins
To feel her feet—her sea-legs, you might say.

2ND SOLDIER. Very like feet they look, the blades
of the oars ;
Tiny, laborious, steadily creeping feet :
She's just a water-gnat with dozens of legs.

1ST SOLDIER. And seems from here to matter, as
she crawls
Toiling so small over the sea's blue light,
As much as if we watcht a black fly crawl
Over the blue awning.

Phoenix

2ND SOLDIER. Ay, but she knows
She'd best be gone : those oars of hers, I'm sure,
Spurn at the water till they bend. See now
The glittering white fuss she threshes round her !

1ST SOLDIER. Now ship oars and set sail ! You
have the mole
Fairly to windward.

2ND SOLDIER. She hears you ! Up she hawls
Her shaking canvas, dusky as her hull.

1ST SOLDIER. That's what I like to see : keep a
taut sheet,
You steersman with the jewel in your hat
That flashes even to here.

2ND SOLDIER. She's away now.
And now her flight grazes the gleaming water
As if she were a black wild duck that skims
Glancing the waves a long way before settling.

1ST SOLDIER. The bird has left a fine chick in our
keeping.

2ND SOLDIER. One pirate told me, if they'd a
clear month
Dealing in girls at the price the king paid,
They'd never drink the profits in two years,

Phoenix

1ST SOLDIER. Good sailing, you black pirates, and good cheating !

(*The QUEEN comes up through the stairway.*)

QUEEN. What do you shout for ? What is there in sight ?

1ST SOLDIER. Only the ship of the Sidonian pirates Putting to sea.

QUEEN. They have my curse among them :
They do not know what kind of supercargo
I have sent voyaging with them out of my heart.
They are the men who've taken plague on board,
And sail off gay, to find, some mid-sea morn,
An evil god quietly sitting above them
On the high stern, and smiling like a hunter,
Enchanting them to feel like feeble dreams ;
And where he looks and smiles a sailor drops
Festering in the sunlight.—But you are to watch
The land, not the sea-faring.

1ST SOLDIER. Nothing to watch,
My lady, on the land, coming or going.

QUEEN. Fools, you've dazzled yourselves, staring
against
The brightness of the sea—the bright ill-luck,

Phoenix

The tinsel-gay malignity that still
Keeps lapping at the earth. Look to the land ;
Look hard and tell me that you see the Prince
Galloping : he must feel me needing him !—
I am ill-used ! Phoenix to stay so long
Abroad on his first hunting, and I then
To be so fiery-parcht with need of him !—
Well, have you lookt ? Do you strain your eyes with
looking ?

1ST SOLDIER. Nothing at all, my lady, coming or
going.

QUEEN. Are you blind-folded ? I will look myself.

*(She goes up into one of the watchers' posts
above the awning, where she is not seen from
below, though in sight of the audience.)*

*(Presently AMYNTOR and RHODOPE come up
through the stairway.)*

AMYNTOR. Out of breath, sweetheart ?

RHODOPE. Me out of breath ?—You are.

AMYNTOR. A little. But you'll call this worth a
climb.

This is my pleasant place ; and here we'll keep
A kind of heaven, where we shall find our moods

Phoenix

Made one with things. For look how white and
smooth

Idleness has become a marble place ;
And this is our day-dreaming passion glowing
Over it, this blue and shadowy light.
O coloured like the summer of the gods
Our life shall be up here ; here shall it pause
Like that immortal fortune of the gods
In unconcerned perfection of ourselves.
No world's here left for love to gaze upon
But what must seem love's imagery—the blue
Trembling flame of the sea's infinite gleam,
And clouded snows that pace about the air
With towering motion, breathing shadowless light.

RHODOPE (*yawns*). Ah—La !

The bench is comfortable and the view pretty.
But not all day up here, surely !—A goddess,
When she can wear the love of a wealthy god,
Needs to show off.

AMYNTOR. Well, so you shall ; my love
Shall blaze upon you : gold and emerald
And ruby, and silk as bright as summer streams.
I'll clothe you in a god's delighted desire.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR (*to the QUEEN : blustering*).

What are you sneaking here for? Leave me alone :

I will have no one breaking in on my pleasure.

What is it you're about? Spying?

QUEEN.

Yes, spying

To see if Phoenix is not coming home :

I've much to say to him.

RHODOPE.

Phoenix? Who's he?

QUEEN. My son, and his.

RHODOPE.

O, are you old enough

To have a grown-up son?

QUEEN.

To have a son

Who's old enough himself to be a father ;

So you can call me granny if you like.

RHODOPE. I don't need you to learn me to call names :

You are the woman the King has done with.

QUEEN. And therefore he bought you : it's to be hoped

The pirates did not swindle him in you

As blankly as they did over those rugs—

Threadbare trash !

Phoenix

RHODOPE. Eh ! We did have a laugh
About those rugs !

QUEEN. " We did " ?—So you were all
Good friends together ?

RHODOPE. Well, why not ?—But then
What would a man know about buying rugs ?

QUEEN. Or this man about buying girls ?

RHODOPE. But see
The bargain he has made !

AMYNTOR. Enough of this !

RHODOPE. Girls—that's a thing he's wise about !

AMYNTOR. No more !

QUEEN. Then he's been mighty quiet learning it,
And kept it hid.

RHODOPE. Yes, you would see to that :
Poor man !

QUEEN. I did !

AMYNTOR. I'll not be troubled here !
Go !

QUEEN (*to RHODOPE*). As for you, after so long on
ship-board
Salt fare's a feast you like ?

RHODOPE. Salt ?

Phoenix

QUEEN (*pointing to AMYNTOR*). This old flesh
Salted white with years.

AMYNTOR. Go down !

(*The QUEEN moves towards the stairs.*)

RHODOPE (*calling after her*). I like
What I can get. Besides, he's only grizzly.—

(*The QUEEN goes down the stairs.*)

(*To AMYNTOR*). Am I really the first ? Well,
you've been good !

AMYNTOR. So ! Time has paid a visit to the gods,
Time that is forever a thing past,
And gone down full of grudges, to keep up
Her trifling stir of dust on the dry earth,
Cancelling still with tarnish of her hands
The gleam of every moment as it flies :
And we stay here, idling immortally !

1ST SOLDIER. I see a dust that may be riding men.

RHODOPE. Bless me, there's someone there still !

AMYNTOR. Only soldiers :
They always have a watch up there.—Keep quiet !

(*Shouting up to the sentry.*)

1ST SOLDIER. It will be the prince Phoenix and
the hunt.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. No matter if it is : don't bother me.—
I will be now nothing but my own pleasure.
I've been mere senseless duty until now,
Like blundering in a mist. But over me
You dawn : at your first glance my foggy air
Spangled with particles of whitening gold ;
Now that bewilderment of milky fire
Clears to a blaze of morning in my eyes—

1ST SOLDIER. Now I can see : the Queen must
know. It is
Phoenix, it is the Prince !

2ND SOLDIER. And he comes galloping,
Galloping hard, far ahead of his troop ;
Though all of them are stretcht with speed as though
Hornets hung on their horses' quarters.

1ST SOLDIER. The Queen
Should know.

2ND SOLDIER. One of us should go tell the Queen.

AMYNTOR. Silence !

1ST SOLDIER. I'll find the Queen.

AMYNTOR. You stir from there,
I'll hang you by the heels for a whole day.
What, leave my roof unwatcht ?—now no more noise.

Phoenix

RHODOPE. Is there a bustle like this always in heaven ?

We might be at the docks. I thought we were Gods on the noiseless top of all the world.

AMYNTOR. We shall be quiet now.—O there's a ghost

Of earthly sound roaming the air of heaven ;
Else would the gods forget what misery
Must come to life only to feed their bliss.
So here : those are not men to us : they are
Mere rumours of the care that frets beneath us,
Reminding our unaltering delight
Still to be fired with an amazed self-love.

RHODOPE (*trying to see the soldiers*). I wonder what these rumours look like.

AMYNTOR (*drawing her back*). Ghosts
To us : now nothing lives in the whole world
But you and I ; for only love is life,
And we have in a mesh of exquisite sense
Caught all the fire and sweetness that is love.
Our life is brightness now that will not take
The touch of earth, no more than dust pollutes
A blade of forging steel,

Phoenix

When from the coals it comes
Blinding hot, inspired with sparkling glory.
Yet are we also life
Steept in a love as sweet
As candied flowers or fruits drencht in honey.

RHODOPE. Why, that's it : I was wondering what
heaven lackt.

Sweetmeats, of course : I love honey-drowned
fruit.

Can we have some brought here ?

AMYNTOR.

You are a child.—

(*To the soldiers*) Come down, one of you.

(*1ST SOLDIER enters from the look-out.*)

RHODOPE.

Quite a handsome ghost.

AMYNTOR. Ask for the Queen's best candy-stuff—

1ST SOLDIER.

The prince

Phoenix is just alighting at the gate.

RHODOPE. O, I am tired of Phoenix !

AMYNTOR.

Do you know

What sometimes chances to a nimble tongue ?

They stretch it out with pincers and then leave it
Skewered, to loll full length and take the air.

Bring me the sweet things instantly.

Phoenix

RHODOPE (*detaining him*). And wine,
Amiable ghost ; the queen's best wine as well,
Some golden wine ; and for the candy, figs
Or cherries, or sharp-sweet quinces best of all.
Ply those excellent legs as if you were running
Sturdily out of a fight, and back again
As if you had heard your side had won.

AMYNTOR. No words :
Instantly now ! (1ST SOLDIER *exit downstairs*.)

RHODOPE. Well ?—You were saying something.

AMYNTOR. You never shall tell me what you have
 been, the things
You've suffered, before this—

RHODOPE. Why should I suffer ?
I am not one to suffer things, unless
You would call being hungry suffering :
It never spoilt my looks though.

AMYNTOR. Not a hint !
I will not have it. You never lived till now.

RHODOPE. What ! Never lived ?—There's one
 thing I can do,
And that is, live !

AMYNTOR. You never lived till now :

Phoenix

Understand that—never till now!—How could
you,

Since you were but delight love had imagined,
Wandering phantasmal like a dream

That cannot find a dreamer. But love knew

I was the vacant sleep waiting for you

To glide into surprising presence there

And shine alive at last. Love brought you to me,

Gave you the dream's desire to be dreamt and
known ;

And like the god that dreams this summer earth

My life divinely sleeps, in effortless

Lucid ecstasy of imagination :

Dreaming your loveliness, touching you, breathing
you,

You who exist because my love can dream you.

(PHOENIX *rushes in, calling aloud.*)

PHOENIX. Mother, where are you ? Where is she,
Father ?—O Father

I've killed a lion ! And I was all alone——

AMYNTOR. Not so much noise, dear boy, not so
much noise.

PHOENIX. I must tell Mother.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. Why, yes ; you run and find her.

PHOENIX. No one was with me : mine was the
only spear

Tougt him. The thicket where I was standing
watch

Burst in front of me with a deafening crackle
Like dry wood mightily flaring, and the beast
Came blazing on me, a leap of yellow flame.

AMYNTOR. Yes ; and now, Phoenix——

RHODOPE. O, so this is Phoenix ?

AMYNTOR. Your mother likes to hear these things
the first :

Run down and tell her.

PHOENIX. But I will just show you
The thrust I gave him——

AMYNTOR. I'm sure you have no notion
Of what a sight you are——African black
With sweat and dirt.

RHODOPE. Are you like that all over ?

AMYNTOR. And I can see you're tired out : run
off,—
Have a good bath, and sleep—sleep a long time.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. But just hear this : I spitted him as
clean

As if I had practised it on fifty lions ;
Right down into the roaring of his throat
I drove my stroke as he charged slaughtering at me.

(*Re-enter 1ST SOLDIER with sweets and wine.*)

AMYNTOR. A fine tale it will be when you are tidy.
But now this lady wants to eat her sweets
In peace.

PHOENIX. Who is she ?

AMYNTOR. She's—O she's your aunt.
Let us alone now ; we have some affairs
Must be talkt out.

PHOENIX. And they are more to you
Than my first lion ? And the way I stood
Alone and took him on my single spear ?

AMYNTOR. O, he was very likely old and had no
teeth ;
Or a pet lion strayed : and I have heard
The King of Lokri's lion is gone missing ;
The children used to ride on him.

PHOENIX. No, no !
This was a raging beast, a man-eater :

Phoenix

You have not heard the half. He was so feared
No one would beat for us ; we had to draw
In wide half-moon a skirmish of our bowmen
Round him, volleying into the likely haunts,
To fluster him with arrows towards my stand.
Listen : I'll tell you.

AMYNTOR. O, this is mere damnation !
Am I to be worn out with the whole world
Bothering at me ? I have a grave concern
To settle with this lady—and a swarm
Of noises must needs cluster on my brain
To make a frenzy of me. (*To RHODOPE*) Come to my
gardens :
There we'll have peace ; and I have roses there
From Persia, with a fragrance that will seize
Your heart like yearning.

RHODOPE (*to PHOENIX*). Good-bye, Lion-killer.
I hope you'll never take me for a lion
And thrust me with your spear where I am tender.

(*Exeunt AMYNTOR and RHODOPE. 2ND SOLDIER
comes down.*)

1ST SOLDIER. So now you are a hunter !

2ND SOLDIER. The first game
You kill, a lion !

Phoenix

PHOENIX. And alone, mind that !
No one at all was with me.

1ST SOLDIER. A full-grown lion ?

PHOENIX. Why, he came ravening for me : I was
to be

A mouthful snatcht as easily as you might pluck
A cherry ; and I lodged him on my spear
As neat as picking hay up with a fork.
Wait till you see the skin.

2ND SOLDIER. And your first kill !

PHOENIX. O now I know the life for a man !
This round

Of manners in a court—it's puppet-show.
Why should the morning burn into the air
And fill it with blue fire, and shivering grass
Lie gray with dew, and chill woods smell of earth,
If I'm not there to leap awake with mind
Clear as water, and feel
The forces of my body
Keen and tuneable like strings of music ?

2ND SOLDIER. Let's have the whole hunt from the
start.

PHOENIX. You shall.

Phoenix

It was a wicked beast. It seems he lived
In smouldering grudge against mankind, and ruled
The country like a demon.—But I must find
The Queen.

1ST SOLDIER. O, they are scouring everywhere
for her.

A moment now will bring her here. There's been
A fever in the place to-day about you.

PHOENIX. What ! Am I wanted ?

1ST SOLDIER. Ah, has he been wanted !

2ND SOLDIER. " You must see him ! Tell me he
is coming ! "—

That's how the Queen kept on all day : and we
Glowing for you up there until our eyes
Stood out like crab's eyes.

PHOENIX. What's all this about ?

1ST SOLDIER. You'll know just now : I have sent
word of you

Buzzing to every corner of the palace.

'Twill stir her like a gad-fly.

PHOENIX. What can she want ?

The King could do without me.

2ND SOLDIER. Well, he might !

Phoenix

1ST SOLDIER. She's here !

(Before they can get back to their posts the

QUEEN enters.)

QUEEN. Phoenix ! At last !—How was the sport ?

PHOENIX. You have not heard ?—A lion, a full-grown lion !

QUEEN. A lion ! Was it your kill ?

PHOENIX. Mine was the first
Stroke at him.

QUEEN. O, well done !

PHOENIX. And mine the last.

QUEEN. The death was yours ?

PHOENIX. First stroke and last were one.
I was alone against him. I thrust once :
And left them nothing more to do but flay him.

QUEEN. Why, we must make a feast of this.

PHOENIX. A feast ?
But I hate getting drunk.—And I hate walls
And roofs and beds and being waited on.
I can't feel clean in a house.

QUEEN. Indeed, just now
You don't look clean.

PHOENIX. You know what I would say :

Phoenix

To feel the life in me running clean and bright
And hale as the air between the sun and the sea.

QUEEN. I know. You are young : that's all
you're saying now.

But you must love to live all kinds of moods :
Dangers abroad and pleasuring at home—
I mean you to be first in everything ;
And not a soul in the court—no, not one !—
But shall step back from you and know his
master.—

But we must see to the feast ; and you should wear
The skin. Will it be here to-night ?

PHOENIX. O surely ;
I left them at it. Soon as the life in the beast
Had shuddered itself still, and those lithe flanks
Sprawled like the slack of a half-empty bag
With their limp hollows and ungainly bones,
I leapt to horse, my glorying hot upon me,
To post with the news myself.—And lucky I did,
It seems : you have some need of me ?

QUEEN. I have ?
Who told you that ?

PHOENIX. But do you not want me ?

Phoenix

QUEEN. Of course I want you home, when you hunt lions.

PHOENIX. O was that all ?

QUEEN. And what else could there be ?—
(*To the sentries.*) One of you, now, find where the King has gone.

1ST SOLDIER. He's in the Persian garden.

QUEEN. Break in on him.
Give him the Prince's news.

PHOENIX. O he has had it.
It might have been a rabbit I had killed
By what he made of it.

QUEEN. Well, give him this
From me : there is to be no thought of sleep,
But feasting with the Prince all the night through.

1ST SOLDIER. And, I should say, flogging all day
for me.

QUEEN. Off now ! (*Exit 1ST SOLDIER.*)
(*To the 2ND SOLDIER*) Is this your post ?
(*2ND SOLDIER goes aloft.*)

PHOENIX. Father was strange,
If I had a son, and he had killed a lion—
And do you know what whimsy of longing ran

Phoenix

Wild through my brain as I was galloping here ?
That I were riding home to my baby boy,
Planning to snatch him out of his cradle and say
“ You too will face some day a tawny demon
Springing out of his ambush on you alone :
And you too with the one right thrust of your spear
Will change the terrible graces of his anger
As instantly as when a sail's cut down
Tumbling out of its life in the high wind
It cowers in helpless creases on the deck.”—
Who was that lady here ? Not your sister ?

QUEEN. My sister !

PHOENIX. Father said she was my aunt.

QUEEN. Some joke of his. She is just staying
here :

No one to do with us. How did you like her ?

PHOENIX. How did I like her ? I never lookt at
her.

QUEEN. Now I call that unnatural.—You there !
Soldier !

After your fellow, quick : and tell the King
There is no doubt to-night shall be a feast ;
And he should make his orders.

Phoenix

2ND SOLDIER (*on his way to the stairs*). They'll be made

For me. I can see me put up to fight

A cat-o'-nine-tails, let alone a lion. (*Exit.*)

QUEEN. Simply unnatural. In my young days Lads knew what girls were for.

PHOENIX. Simpering things. I know right well what the girls think they're for : It's to make men look fools.

QUEEN. They're not far out With some men ; and they've managed it with you, If they have made you scared to look at them.

PHOENIX. Me scared ?—I made that lion look a fool ; It's not a girl will do the same to me.

QUEEN. O, with your glances shying at her, you'd miss How she enjoyed quizzing you. I am still A woman, old as I may be ; and don't I know The giggling little triumph over you She's making at this moment !

PHOENIX. I know better.

Phoenix

She will be scowling at the thought of me :

She knows now what it is not to exist.

QUEEN. Well, well : no anger. But she will be
thinking

We have odd princes here.

PHOENIX. Yes, if it's odd

To come home with a lion-skin to wear

After your first hunt.

QUEEN. But that's what I mean !

She sees you come in here, nerved and sharp-
set

After a spell of strained and risky living—

The commonest nobody would be ready then

To take his pleasure—and you are a prince !—

And there she is, waiting for you to take her :

And she—doesn't exist ! What is a girl

To gain from being made of lively flesh

If such a man as you won't look at her ?

PHOENIX. This seems a pretty lesson.

QUEEN. O, you a man ?

You're still a squeamish boy. I must take you

Seriously, Phoenix. Women know well enough

The sort of world they're in—yes, and like it.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. Well, what of that ? I'm in the same world.

QUEEN. You ?

You've never toucht the shadow of the world
Women belong to.

PHOENIX. Why, what is their world ?

QUEEN. Men, my dear, men.—But let them catch

The world they should amuse scrupling at it—
O the mere glimpse of nicety about it—
And the fun changes sides. I'll not have that
With you, Phoenix ; I'll have no half-grown girl
Drolling at you because she sees you blush
To meet her eyes on you.

PHOENIX. All one to me.

For what I care, girls can be full of feelings
As a pot of boiling water is of bubbles :
I am not bothered with them.

QUEEN. Why should you be ?

What I am saying is, you're called a prince :
Then be one ! not a startled hobbledehoy.
You can face lions : face a girl and make her
Lower her eyes, or it will be her glee

Phoenix

To make a gawk of you in everyone's sight.
And that, my boy, is what I will not bear.

PHOENIX. I'll have a look at her, if that will please
you.

QUEEN. You'll find yourself being pleased. And
now's your time.

PHOENIX. Now? She's not here.

QUEEN. I'm waiting for her, though.

PHOENIX. You've sent for her?

QUEEN. No : but I'm sure she's coming
As fast as she can arm your panting father
Up the stairs to have his rage out with me.

PHOENIX. Has he been crost?

QUEEN. I've sent him word of things
I must have done, and he is with his roses.
He broods among his roses like a man
Trying to find a hint of a lost dream ;
And if the mood is snapt, it lashes back
Like a string overstrained and cut, and whips him
Into a fury that must scold a little.

I hear it coming : we know these harmless storms.

*(Enter AMYNTOR and RHODOPE, followed by
the two soldiers, who take up their posts aloft.)*

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. You dared break in on me again !
I'll make

Your haunting insolence stop short at this.

QUEEN. I'm glad you've come. You'll pardon
me : I have

A humble thing to say. Phoenix will give
This lady entertainment while I say it.

RHODOPE. I'm sure he will.

AMYNTOR. Stay beside me.

QUEEN (*to* AMYNTOR). What harm ?

He must learn easy manners with your guests.—

Phoenix, take this lady aside and show her
Our coastwise outlook. (*To* RHODOPE.) It is
celebrated.

RHODOPE. I'll have enchanted eyes, if he will
take me.

AMYNTOR. What do you mean ?

QUEEN. Why, you are slow, Phoenix !

RHODOPE. Come and tell me about the terrible
poke

You gave the badger.

PHOENIX. Badger ? It was a lion !

RHODOPE. A lion : so it was. Lions, I've heard,

Phoenix

Are just large cats. Was this a tabby lion ?
Did it miaow at you ?

PHOENIX. Can it be you don't know
A lion is the god among the beasts ?

RHODOPE. Does he work miracles ?

PHOENIX. He has no need.
At wind of him, the hulking bison's hoof
Pounds such a fury of stampede, the rock
Ten fathoms under earth must ring of it ;
And then the lion in an easy bound
Cuffs at his spine, and the careering brute
Somersaults headlong. That is a lion for you.

RHODOPE. And you killed one of these gods all
by yourself ?
Tell me the whole story.

*(They are by the parapet at back. The KING
and QUEEN remain in front, by the stairs.)*

QUEEN. He's just a boy.
No need to scowl.

AMYNTOR. What have you got to say ?

QUEEN. I've been a fool. It is only a fool-
woman
Loses her temper with a man. And you

Phoenix

Forgot how age rankles in a woman.

Enough of that. I'll be no trouble to you.

AMYNTOR. You've lost the knack you had of troubling me.

QUEEN. Nothing shall be but what is to your liking ;

Only your will shall count.

AMYNTOR. And time it did.

QUEEN. You see how it is, though. Here is Phoenix home :

We must not set him vexing his young mind,

Seeing us look malignant on each other.

I would have this affair fleet by his sense

Like an impotent ghost at noon, faint and noiseless.

But if he come home with the heart of a hero

From his first hunt, bragging a lion's kill,

And we've no feast for him, will he not think

Some monster has come striding in between

His life and ours ? And there is none, unless

We let our rancour grow. Well, mine is dead,

And yours fed upon mine.

AMYNTOR.

What do you want ?

Phoenix

QUEEN. A feast to-night for Phoenix.

AMYNTOR.

When did I say

I would not have him feasted ?

QUEEN.

So that's settled :

And you will order for it ?—And meanwhile

I'll hint her manners to her.

AMYNTOR.

You teach her ?

What are good manners but beauty in the act ?

You cannot teach her.

QUEEN.

O you mistake me.

I only mean, she must not jeer at me :

That would make Phoenix rough with her, and you

Would snarl him down—and at once before his eyes

The thing is notable, glaring at him.

So I will let her see I've changed my mood,

And mean mere friendship now ; and you, Amyntor,

You at the feast to-night with her beside you,

You will not let the boy read in your eyes

Contempt of me, and passion worshipping her ?

I only ask for this : in all the rest

You shall be free from me.

AMYNTOR.

Why, I don't want

A wrangling boy worrying me. Keep him quiet,

Phoenix

I'll play the part. But it is my word now
Rules in the house.

QUEEN. I say so.—It is time
You went about the feast. Tell the steward
To seat the girl and Phoenix in between us,
Phoenix by me and Rhodope by you :
That will look best. Now we are all at one.
But you have much to do ; and I must set
Rhodope at her ease with me.

AMYNTOR. I'm glad
This is the way you've chosen. You are prudent. (*Exit.*)

QUEEN. I am.—

RHODOPE. Why, this was terrible !

PHOENIX. Pooh, nothing.
There was a dangerous moment—

RHODOPE. O you men !
Always so wild to gamble with your lives !

QUEEN. Now then, you two : I'm bound to
interrupt you.

You can finish the story at the feast.

RHODOPE. O you must tell it me all over again !

PHOENIX. I will !

QUEEN. Plenty of time for that to-night.

Phoenix

During my private matters with the King,
You must put up with Phoenix for a while.

RHODOPE. Put up with him ?

QUEEN. Yes : it was good of you.
For of course I know it is old men you like.

RHODOPE. I've told you once, I like what I can
get.

QUEEN. You do ?—Everything ?—I should have
rather thought
You would take care to get what you can like.—
Still, it is fine to hear an old man talk.

RHODOPE. Nay, if it's talking, let it be of lions.
The maundering that has dinned upon my brain
All day ! I've had to gape till I felt faint.

QUEEN. I can remember, when I was your age,
I couldn't bear old men : not when they came
Too close, I mean.

RHODOPE. O I am used to that.

QUEEN. Why should we not be friends ?—I know
I'm old ;
And what men are, that is a thing I know.
And as for you, my dear—I'm sure I wish
I was a man myself !—It's strange to me

Phoenix

How careless of their hours young people are.
It's their own fault, if the old folk push in
Between them and their pleasure.

RHODOPE.

O, we know

How to slip past ! Half the fun is in that.

QUEEN. Phoenix is proud about that lion of his.

RHODOPE. He should be proud. It was the sort
of feat

They sing of in the ballads.

QUEEN.

Do tell him that !—

He'll be beside you at the feast to-night.

RHODOPE. What, sitting next to me ?

QUEEN.

Of course you'll have

The King's grave speeches in your other ear—

RHODOPE. I'll have them bouncing off the back
of my head !

QUEEN. I'd like to see the lad enjoy to-night.

No sort of homecoming for a young man,

With only his old mother flattering him !—

See if you can't be kind to him a little !— (*Exit.*)

RHODOPE. O ? Is that it ?—I will ! I certainly
will !

(*She follows the QUEEN downstairs, laughing.*)

Phoenix

2ND SOLDIER. I'm sure she will.

1ST SOLDIER. And if I get the chance
She shall be kind to me ; I know the sort.
It pours from one love into another as smooth
And noiseless as a theft of tilted oil
Goes sleek and sliding from the jar to the flask.

CURTAIN.

ACT II

The Night of the Feast. The awning has been furled and removed, leaving the palace roof open to the starlit night. On top of each watch-tower a brazier is burning.

The stage is apparently empty. Enter the QUEEN and RHODOPE.

RHODOPE. Delicious air !

QUEEN. But there's no Phoenix here !

RHODOPE. O we can do without men for a while.

QUEEN. Now where can he have slipt to ? I made sure

It would be here.

RHODOPE. Well, it is no great matter.—

The King was right : this is the place. The air
Makes it a blessing to be breathing here
After the frowst downstairs of cookery steam
And smoking torches, and the smell of the wine

Phoenix

The King spilt when he lost his temper with me ;
Didn't he shout !

QUEEN. It was just after that
Phoenix slid off. But where, I want to know !

RHODOPE. To find another lion—O I hope not !
For then he'd tell me about it.

QUEEN. You did not like him ?

RHODOPE. A tall young man with a nose as straight
as that,

And me not like him ? Certainly I liked him.—
I've come to feel, though, it was a mistake
Lions were ever invented.

QUEEN. Boys must talk
Over their doings : you have no need to listen.

RHODOPE. O, when the King is thrilling down
my neck

And tickling at my ears with his hoarse fancies
About himself behaving like a god,
Why, gods seem a much worse mistake than
lions.

But they must all talk big, one way or another.

QUEEN. I will go look for Phoenix. I am sure
He would be with you if he knew——

Phoenix

RHODOPE.

He knows.

I told him I'd be here.

QUEEN.

He can't have heard you.

RHODOPE. It was he had the notion to meet here.

QUEEN. Then where's he mooning now ?

RHODOPE.

O let him be.—

I could believe myself at home again

On board the ship, up here : like when we'd lie

Benighted in a calm, poised in a nowhere

Of breathless dark midway between the stars

That throng the air and the stars that throng the water.

QUEEN. But it won't do to have this slacken now
Into a dawdling business. I must find him. (*Exit.*)

RHODOPE (*moving to the back of the stage*). O, it is
taking the cold silver fire

Of starlight into your blood, to breathe this air !

What a simple harmless world it would have been

If they had made it with no men in it :

And no gods, and no lions.

1ST SOLDIER (*lying at foot of watch-tower*). And
no women.

Phoenix

RHODOPE (*tripping over him as he speaks*). Ow !

What are you ?—It is never Phoenix !

1ST SOLDIER (*getting up*). Pff ! That's better : I have slept it off.

I can always do that with a dose of wine.—

So it is you, my pretty ?

RHODOPE. Ssh ! The Queen !

1ST SOLDIER. Nay, we are all alone.

RHODOPE. What ! Has she gone ?—

And how did you get drunk ?

1ST SOLDIER. Stole it, silly.

If there's a thing I want and haven't got,

I steal it, see ?—Like this. (*Kissing her.*)

RHODOPE. What arms you have !

Nearly as thick as my legs.—O not too tight !

They're cobble-stones, the bunches of your muscles.

Wasn't it you were the ghost up there this morning ?

1ST SOLDIER. I'll show you the kind of ghost.

RHODOPE. Yes, but not now.

O, you won't frighten me in the dark. But here

We shall have Phoenix running in on us,

Phoenix

And he might make you play at lions with him.
Be a good ghost and vanish.

If I do,

What will you play with me ?

A scoundrel ghost !

I believe he's in love with me.—Run off ;
I'll find you sometime. Leave go, or I'll tickle.—
What arms these are !—Will you be sentry again
To-morrow morning ?

Yes, if you will come

And have the life squeezed out of you.

One thing

I will not come for : if you try it on,
I'll tell the King of you and have you branded.
Promise you won't, now !

What ?

Swear on your life

You won't make love to me by talking at me !
I have been seethed in talk since I came here.

1ST SOLDIER. That's what you get of going with
the gentry.

But you'll be safe with me. My love's no talker.

Phoenix

RHODOPE. You'll do. Give me a kiss and jump.—

O look !

Here's Phoenix come !

(*Enter AMYNTOR.*)

AMYNTOR. Where is my heaven ?—The god
Returns from earth, hungering to be taken
Into his heaven again.

RHODOPE. O, heaven, is it ?
I thought we should be killing lions.

1ST SOLDIER. The King ?

RHODOPE. We'll face this out easily. Can you
not smell
The wine on him ?

AMYNTOR. Ah, she is there, my heaven !—
Why, there are men with you ! Who are those
men ?

RHODOPE. I lost my way downstairs, and these
two soldiers
Guided the pair of me here, to stay for you.
Now you have come, they can both go to bed.

(*Exit 1ST SOLDIER.*)

AMYNTOR. Those braziers make a puzzling light.
It seemed,

Phoenix

Just for a moment, as if it was one man
Walking away.

RHODOPE. O no ; they have both gone.
I have been waiting for you.

AMYNTOR. I must have drowzed.
Let me sit on the bench. Stand there before me.

RHODOPE. How many am I ?

AMYNTOR. What, will you say I'm drunk ?—
O drunk with you, Rhodope, drunk with you !
I cannot tell you. I am the life of the world
Escaping from its fate. Seeing and hearing
And touching are become adorable things.
And it is I go forth triumphing blissfully
Into your loveliness before me, I
Am life adoring its own marvellous senses !
O drunk with you !—and a little drunk with wine ;
With wine that is the summer of the gods.

(Lying full length on the bench.)

Look at it there—summer asleep in heaven :
It is my mind ! My mind is night and stars !
I am the depth of that unspeakable blue,
I am that glittering plenty of white delights !—
And I am sleepy.

Phoenix

I had a thought just now. What can it be,
Rhodope, teasing me to bring it to mind ?

RHODOPE. Thirst, I should think, after all that.

AMYNTOR.

I have it !

Why is there not blue wine ?—Summer should be
The colour of everything ours, the mountain summer
Our love inhabits : everything blue as the air
Of noon or midnight, white as snow or the stars.
There must be blue wine : there is white already.
I am very sleepy. (*He falls asleep.*)

RHODOPE. Odious old man ; nothing but gloat
and talk.

But counting him, that's two. Now where's the
third ?

—And how he fools about the stars ! The thing
I look for in the stars is what I'm not ;
There is enough of what I am down here.—
Ah, what's this ? Do they say, Three for luck ?

(*Enter PHOENIX, wearing the lion's skin.*)

PHOENIX. Rhodope, Rhodope ? Where are you ?
O you are there, Rhodope, my wonder !

RHODOPE. I have been waiting for you.

PHOENIX.

Then it is true !

Phoenix

RHODOPE. That I've been waiting ?—You tell me
where to meet you,
Keep me loitering for you all by myself,
And ask me if it's true ?

PHOENIX. You must forgive me.
Not till the Queen had told me you were here
Could I believe it, Rhodope—dare I believe it.

RHODOPE. You might have come to see.

PHOENIX. No, I dare not.

RHODOPE. Why? Did you think I would leap out
at you

And towze you, lion fashion ? But even then
You might have brought your spear, and pusht me
with it.

PHOENIX. This is not anger jeering at me ?

RHODOPE. Well,
You've kept me waiting.

PHOENIX. But you will forgive me.
Sitting beside you in the noise of the feast,
The thought of being alone and quiet with you
Shot stinging like a spark into my mind.
Before I knew, I had spoken ; and heard my words
Like one who wakes up to his own voice raving.

Phoenix

That you would meet me here ! I dared not think it.
For it would mean, Rhodope, if you came
To be with me alone here—But you have come !
And you know what it means !—O even now
Dare I think it ?

RHODOPE. To think is no great daring.

PHOENIX. To think ? Do my hands think ? Dare
I let them

Take their longing to know the warmth of you ?
Let them go loving with their startled sense
Over your smoothness ?—I cannot keep them off you !

RHODOPE. No ? I am sure you can.

PHOENIX. You are sure ? Why ?

RHODOPE. Because you do.

PHOENIX (*seizing her in his arms*). Rhodope, it was this
I did not dare believe.

RHODOPE. You believe now ?

PHOENIX. It is so strange to me I might have leapt
Clean into a new world : all that my mind
Has known till now shrivels aside as feebly
As a grey cobweb broken through.

RHODOPE. A world
So strange, there are not even lions in it ?

Phoenix

PHOENIX. O I have been a chattering boy with you.
You'll hear no more of that. This morning's pride
Has gone the way of knucklebones and marbles.

RHODOPE. It hangs about you still.

PHOENIX. No, not a shred.

RHODOPE. A whole hide of it : here's that pelt
the feast

So doated on and made such cheers about :
And now is in my way.

PHOENIX. Off it goes, then ;
Ridiculous thing.

RHODOPE. Ah, you do like me better ?

PHOENIX. I could no longer feel it dangling on me.

RHODOPE. Nor smell it, I dare say. It had a
brave

And savage look, snarling on your shoulders.
You are pleasanter to handle, though, without it.

PHOENIX. What should I know now but the blood
in me glowing

To beat so near to yours in this slim body ?—
O I have yielded now : I have no will left
But to be life that blends with yours as sound
Chimes into sound. But at the first there was

Phoenix

Some mutiny. My brain baffled with it :
I tried to think against it ; and I tried
To think the unbelievable things it promised.
Then, like the seizure of a demon's hand,
And with as fierce a search into my life
As mountain wind blowing an icy sleet,
The strength of it had me. I could not bear it.
I dreaded you beside me. I had to go
Where I could be alone ; and like a man
In bitter ailment I went shuddering.

RHODOPE. It is a cruel thing, that shuddering love.
It passes, though ; is it not sweeter now ?

PHOENIX. So sweet it asks almost for tears.

RHODOPE. And this
Was why you left the feast ?

PHOENIX. A slighter thing
Moved me as well. I feared the passion in me,
If I let any anger loose, would drive it
Into some storming folly. And when the King—

RHODOPE. The King ?

PHOENIX. Yes : when you would not heed
his stories,
And he broke into hubbub like a ruffian—

Phoenix

RHODOPE. Do you not think, if we went somewhere else,

We should be safer ?

PHOENIX. Safer ?

RHODOPE. Someone might come
Disturbing us, if we stay talking on.

PHOENIX. Was anyone here before I came ?

RHODOPE. O no :
I quietly sauntered away the time alone.

PHOENIX. Why, no one will come now. The
world's asleep,
All but our friendship with immortal natures
Here, where the night looks burning down on us,
And the sea joins its counsel to our sweet
Conspiracy ; and love delights in us.
Come, we will sit here on this bench—

RHODOPE. No, no :
Not on the bench ! there might be dew on it.
I am chilled here. Take me indoors. Please,
Phoenix !

*(They are moving towards the stairs, with arms
round each other's waist, when the King sits
up and stares at them.)*

Phoenix

PHOENIX. And you take me to heaven !

AMYNTOR. Did he say that ?

Those were my very words, now, in the dream !—

Who is that with you ? Where are you going ?

Turn back, Rhodope !

RHODOPE. Yes, he would wake up

The instant we were getting clear.

PHOENIX. Who is it ?

RHODOPE. I'm not to blame. Anyone would have
thought

He'd sleep the night out.

AMYNTOR (*coming towards them*). There shall be
whips for this.

Whips ? They'd be for the merest fancy of it.

Cords of fire this needs, blazing splinters

Stuck till you bristle like a hedgehog with them.

You should have called to me, girl : or did the
beast

Stifle your voice ? Who is it ? One of those soldiers

Come sideling back to bide his wicked moment ?—

Phoenix !—

PHOENIX. There is no matter for this rage.

How could I tell you would be sleeping here ?

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. Well I know you reckon'd on me sleeping !

PHOENIX. This is mere wandering. Do you suppose

I came up here to rouse you ?

AMYNTOR. No : you came
On tiptoe, in a whispering violence.

What are you here for ?

PHOENIX. It is my affair.
But I should think, if you're awake, you'd see.

AMYNTOR. This is the style, then ? You're to
make it look

Gay-witted fooling or a vapour of wine—

You in your mood harmless as a feather

Giddy upon the wind—and laugh it off ?

You will be lucky if you make me think it.

PHOENIX. Now which of us is crazy ?

AMYNTOR. No more talk.
Your guilt stares at me.

PHOENIX. This is tedious.
I am not now the boy you used to check

In every happiness he tried. My guilt ?

Choose better words than that, or choose to go

Phoenix

Such a wry mind, I'm making filthy guess-work
Of some mere rambling foolery.—You say
I am to leave her here ?

RHODOPE. O but you will not !

PHOENIX. No fear of that. But I must sound his
meaning.

AMYNTOR. Must you indeed ? To-morrow will
not do ?

You would start whimpering now ?

RHODOPE. I'll not be left

With him again !

PHOENIX. Again ?

AMYNTOR. Why, my beloved,
Here's no anger for you. I do not make it
A fault of yours, that I must scold him from you—

PHOENIX. Plain, plain ! Plain at last ! Plain and vile !
I've heard of this in tales ; scandals of this
I've heard amuse those who will daub their talk
With mess from rotten hearts : how there have been
Fathers who've set their smooth ingenious lusts
To plunder with a relish their own sons
Deliciously !—And I have now to touch
This fabulous infamy !—Ay, and you said

Phoenix

“ Again,” Rhodope : “ not with him again ” :
Was it not that you said ?—So he’s already
Tried his meddling with you ?

RHODOPE. And sicken’d me.

PHOENIX. I’m sure of it.

AMYNTOR. Rhodope ! You are not
Afraid of this young blusterer ? No need
To find him pleasant speeches !

PHOENIX. And it’s worse
Than all I’ve heard of ! You come practising
Your sly experience behind my back,
Training your often-handled snares to take her ;
And when I find you out you turn on me
In a commanding anger : I’m to obey
The King my father even when he lords it
Over my love ! I’m to be meek and hand her
To your sweet mercy !—Fables never made
Lascivious plot so gross.

AMYNTOR. What ! My mercy !
But I’ll not answer you. Out of our sight !
Your love left to my mercy ? You’re in a dream.
Your love ? I’m sorry for you : leave ours in peace,
And brawl no more about a boyish prank.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. The insolence of old lechery ! I believe
He thinks, Rhodope, if I went down from here,
You, of no force but your own liking for him,
Would watch me go, and nestle to him, sighing !

AMYNTOR. And she would watch you go, and ask
me why
We have no nursery for you.

PHOENIX. Well, Rhodope ?

RHODOPE. What ?

PHOENIX. You are bound by nothing.

He's not the King,
He's not my scheming father. I am a man
And he's a man : he stays here and I go.
Now it is you to say.

RHODOPE. Stay here or go ?

PHOENIX. Your choice.

RHODOPE. It is a joke, to ask me that !

AMYNTOR. And there's your answer, Phoenix !

RHODOPE. Stay with him
When I could go with you ? I tell you, Phoenix,
I will belong to you now. He and his love !
Will I have his old knuckles fumbling me ?
Give him old women : they'll be glad of him.

Phoenix

But I'll not hold him up, clinging against me
With bushes in his nostrils and his ears.
Take me away, Phoenix. I loathe him.

PHOENIX.

Ay !

And there's your answer !—Come with me, beloved,
My beautiful fury. You have paid him fairly.

AMYNTOR. No, wait, wait ! Phoenix ! Do not
take her away !

Phoenix, you are stealing her from me !

PHOENIX. There's been enough drivelling : we'll
find some quiet.

AMYNTOR. I'll give you anything you please for
her :

Phoenix, I must have her ! You do not know
What it has been to find her loveliness
After all these wearisome blank years.
I went with her to heaven. I became
Spirit that was the god of its own life.
This idiot world gleamed about my mind
As if it was the golden flame I made
Quivering round me with my burning passion.
Leave her with me, Phoenix ! You are young,
You will find plenty of other girls to love.

Phoenix

Your sternest will like walking through your shadow.
Phoenix is young ; and you, my poor, rebellious,
Dear, troublesome man, you are not young.

AMYNTOR. Anything but your pity whining at me!

QUEEN. So strong in cranks and notions, and so
weak

When there are things to deal with. Always your
truth

Was what you wanted, never what must be ;
And always your truth lied.—Bruised old fellow !
Desolate as an urchin when his friend
Has pusht him down and run off with his toy
And left him grieving ! Come to bed, my dear.

CURTAIN.

ACT III

Early morning of next day. The awning is in place again ; and the two soldiers are at their posts in the towers.

1ST SOLDIER. Then will you bet on it ?

2ND SOLDIER. But she'd be caught !
There'd be no sense in risking such a trick.

1ST SOLDIER. I say she'll come. Name your bet :
I'll take it.

(Enter RHODOPE.)

RHODOPE. Are you up there ? Now which of you
is mine ?

1ST SOLDIER and 2ND SOLDIER *(together)*. Here !

1ST SOLDIER. You old rascal ! It's me !

2ND SOLDIER. Don't you believe him.

This way, beauty.

RHODOPE *(going up to 1ST SOLDIER)*. I know my
blackbird's voice.

Anyhow, I can tell it from a frog's.

Phoenix

1ST SOLDIER. Yah to you, lad.

2ND SOLDIER. My turn will come.

RHODOPE. It will.

You'll know it when I bite you.

2ND SOLDIER. A biter, are you ?

You can stay there.

1ST SOLDIER. Have a mouthful of me,
And listen for his teeth to grind. Come close.
Plenty of room up here for two in a squeeze ;

(Kissing her)

And it is that you've come for. Now : this is
better

Than blathering with royalty, I think ?

RHODOPE. Not a word against the Prince ; he's a
good learner.

1ST SOLDIER. Ay, but I don't need learning.

2ND SOLDIER. Whist, you two !

I can hear someone.

1ST SOLDIER. At this time of morning !

(To RHODOPE). Still as an image till we know who
it is !

RHODOPE. But they can't see us ?

1ST SOLDIER. You're safe if you don't jostle.

Phoenix

2ND SOLDIER. Put your foot on her tongue, mate,
or you'll hang.

There's a rage coming.

(Enter AMYNTOR with a whip, followed by the
QUEEN.)

AMYNTOR. What ? Not here, not here ?

QUEEN. Lovers are shy, you know. They hide
themselves.

AMYNTOR. My whip's the lover now. He is not
shy ;

He'll rout them out.

QUEEN. You had best give it up.

You are too late with your whip. She's out of reach :
She'll be with Phoenix somewhere.

AMYNTOR. All the better.

He can look on, while I and the one friend
Left to me now, my whip, score her flesh
Criss-cross and scarlet with the way we love her.

QUEEN. O very likely.

AMYNTOR. You think the boy will stop me ?

QUEEN. He will not need to.

AMYNTOR. Why, who will ?

QUEEN. The girl.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. Whimpering at me ? Pah !

QUEEN. Yes, I can see

Just how you've figured her meeting your vengeance.
She'll scream and quail and bend one frighten'd arm
To blind her eyes, and stretch the other out
Beseeching you to spare ? How easily then
You would laugh down upon her kneeling terror,
And make the swooping lash cry through the air
Its shrill zest for the business !—Ah but, my dear,
That's not how it will be.

AMYNTOR. Not ? And how then ?

QUEEN. A smiling girl who clasps her hands
behind her,

Nodding at you with eyes wide open and impudent
Signalling their gay irresistible gibe—

“ Have I not made a pretty piece of mischief ?

But it's done now : come, are we friends again ? ”—

And while you stand ogling a speechless answer

Of credulous new pleasure, and your whip

Trails behind you limp and harmless, she'll turn

Snickering away, and lead her Phoenix off—

Walking like music : the strength of his young
shoulders

Phoenix

Captured in the warm crook of her careless arm.—
No, no, my dear : they've won. Hand me the whip,
And sit here quiet while I hang it up.

AMYNTOR. You'll see who's won. Yes, I will sit
here quiet.

They'll come here before long. I'd spend my
strength

If I went searching further ; and I'll want
All the strength my arm can summon—

QUEEN.

Take care !

You're brandishing again. I'm sure you've given
Your thews so much fierce threatening to do,
The flogging when it comes will scarcely raise
A blush upon her skin.—But have you thought
Who's to take Rhodope's place ? Would it be wise
To have another young one ? It's hard work
Managing these young things.

AMYNTOR.

I manage them

The way I stop the talking of old women.

(Threatening her.)

(Enter PHOENIX.)

PHOENIX. What's this ? You in an anger ? But
when she's heard

Phoenix

The story of last night, slinking will be
The pose for you, and the place for you a corner
Where her indignant scorn will not spy you.
Mother, he tried—

QUEEN. I know.

PHOENIX. So he's confest ?
And looks as glorious about it now
As a gilded thing in sunlight !

QUEEN. I think, by this
His mind's made up to leave some sports alone.
And the thing now for us all is—to forget.

PHOENIX. I have misst Rhodope somehow.—It
cannot be
He has been at her again ! (*To AMYNTOR.*) Where've
you enticed
My Rhodope ?

AMYNTOR. Would you like certain proof
I cannot find her ?

PHOENIX. Well ?

AMYNTOR. You see this whip ?

PHOENIX. Well ?

AMYNTOR. And you see the thong is brown ?—
the brown

Phoenix

Of tough old slicing leather that can rip
Tatters in any flesh it strokes against ?

PHOENIX. Go on.

AMYNTOR. It is too homely a colour for me.
Think what a handsome whip, now, if the thong
Were glazed bright red !—I'd love to have it so.
But it is brown, you see. Is this not proof
I have not yet found Rhodope ?

PHOENIX. It proves
There is a thing more laughably obscene
Than an old man's mumbling lust : it is
A quavering old man blood-thirsty.

AMYNTOR. Lust !
You talk to me of lust ! You with your young
Insolent animalism fouling a love
Like mine !

PHOENIX. Like yours ! Fouling it !

AMYNTOR. Love like mine
That lived the lofty hours of the gods.

PHOENIX. The yellow flies that mate upon the dung
Might call it that. Your love !

QUEEN. Nay, let him be.
He's had his lesson ; we have tamed him now.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. So you forgive him ? That should
make his blood
Scald in his heart ; but I am not so easy.
And even now the wicked fool is threatening !

QUEEN. And who's the worse for that ?

PHOENIX. Why, you are right.
We'll let him keep his anger, and with that
Be brave in front of us. When we are gone
The stiffness will be out of him, I think.

QUEEN. You are much too hard. You have the
treasure safe
He longed for ; and you broke his fingering off
Like stepping past a bramble. You're not hurt ;
And as for me, I am but sorry his heart,
Which should go quietly nowadays, fell into this
Fantastic fit that must have wrencht it cruelly.

PHOENIX. His thought was to disgrace you ; and
to me
He meant an injury I will not think of.
Yes, you are right still : we will pity him.
We can do nothing keener : he has failed.

AMYNTOR. Failed ? Everything in the world fails
but dirt.

Phoenix

The clean things have no power against the dirt.
There is a sort of smearing eagerness
In dirt ; and to find any cleanliness
To smear is dirt's delight. Yes, you have won.

PHOENIX. Hark at the injured man !

AMYNTOR. Injured ?—And fooled.
I might have known how it was going, when she
Sat heedless of me at the feast and gave
Her mind to the random smirking chat of a lad.
(*To the QUEEN.*) It was your doing ! You told me
he was harmless,
And would not have him see your place was taken ;
And out of innocent kindness to you
I kept it from him.

PHOENIX. What did you keep from me ?

AMYNTOR. Why, what you now savour so
pleasantly—
That Rhodope was mine, my very own,
And I was hers, a life like heaven on earth,
Until you came.

PHOENIX. What do you mean ? How yours ?

AMYNTOR. How mine ? I bought her, I payed
money for her.

Phoenix

That made her mine, I hope ?

PHOENIX.

What lies are these ?

AMYNTOR. Lies ! Lies, do you say ?—Is this a
lover's flourish ?

You do not really think I'm lying ?—O no !
Jests like that don't happen !—But if they did
I would have something good to say for the world.—
Don't disappoint me ! Tell me again you think
It is a lie, I bought her.

PHOENIX.

An old man's lie,
An impotent imbecile old man's.

AMYNTOR.

He means it !

He never guesst his delicate bliss was feeding
Upon my leavings ! Astonishing news to him,
His darling had been purchased for my pleasure
Before she thrilled him !—And I will say she proved
Well worth the money.

PHOENIX.

I'll put a stop to this.

QUEEN. Both of you stop. You will not change
what's happen'd
By squabbling about it.

PHOENIX.

I will change
The vile speech in his throat to truth or silence.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. Ay, look at my fine fellow now ! It
gives

A jolt to his dainty mind, to know at last
The hackney thing he's been so exquisitely
In love with.

PHOENIX. It is not true, it cannot be true.

AMYNTOR. Dear boy, she was my drab, my
concubine.

I paid the price of her like buying stock.
She wanted to be bought : she had her beauty
Shown to me as merchandise.—O let me
Relish this a little ! High-minded youth
Clasping his harlot like a maiden love !

PHOENIX. And she does love me.

AMYNTOR. Simple lad ! And me
She loved deliciously a day or two
Before you came. She does her art devoutly.

QUEEN. Do leave the boy alone. What do you
gain
Tormenting him ? Why won't you let things stay
As they have fallen out ?

AMYNTOR. I will indeed,
Soon as he has it clear, the way they've fallen.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. I see what this is. The marauding beast
In anguish of the trap—what can it do
But bite and be malignant to the last ?
Old fool, if there were any truth in this
Would not the Queen have known it ?

AMYNTOR. Did she not know it ?
She was after us as viciously and as softly
As a snow-leopard trots along the snow
In winter famine. Rhodope and I
Would make blithe wagers, when we were alone,
How soon her jealousy would nose us out
And tremble at us, glaring.

QUEEN. Blithe, were you ?
You lookt it : blithe as murderers haunted.

PHOENIX. Mother !
You knew ? And it is true ?

QUEEN. O surely, Phoenix,
You can see plain enough by now.

PHOENIX. She was
Bought for his lust ? That was why she was here ?

QUEEN. You don't suppose I askt her in ?

AMYNTOR. And now,
Am I still lying ?—Why, if I should tell you

Phoenix

How much she cost me, you would vow I lied.
What did the price of her matter to me? I'd pay
Anything this insanely reckoning world
Might ask for such a magical release—

QUEEN. Release! From what? From me?—

Say it: release

From me! And in the end, where are you now?

AMYNTOR. Caught and stifled again! Don't I
know that?

With misery and shame ten times as fiercely
Fastened upon me in a gluttony
Like starving leeches! You need not tell me of
it.—

But for a while I was released—O not
From you alone!—from all the world that hugs me
Smothering down, as bird-lime clutches wings.
In the first splendour of my sight of her
The fiery sweet incredible magic came
And cleansed the world from off me.

(To PHOENIX.) And then came you!
Rousing the dirt you came, hunting your pleasure!
Nothing to trouble you, that when my mind
Could shine like immortality, you flung

Phoenix

Corruption on me again, and seized me down
From my bright freedom to be lapt again
In bird-lime, in the blinding filth of the world.
—Ay, but the rare thing is, you're smeared yourself !
Your feasting love, like men the moon has turned
Into the hungering madness of the wolves,
Awakes from its enchanted gusto and finds
Carrion on its hands and in its mouth.
May it foretell the luck of your whole life !
I wish you may go on as you've begun,
Wenching among the marketable stuff,
And always when the dazzling passion ends
Sicken'd to find yourself plodding in slime.
And it shall be my justice upon you
That never any child shall be called yours
And live : no boy shall thrive to gladden you
After this wickedness : never believe
You will catch son of yours on to your knees
And pour your heart upon him, blessing him,
As I pour my whole heart in cursing mine !

PHOENIX. But this I will not bear. It shall end
now.

(Drawing his sword on AMYNTOR.)

Phoenix

QUEEN. No, no : he has squandered upon your
name

Infamy enough without that.

PHOENIX.

You on his side ?

QUEEN. Surely on yours. Gather your wits.

You know

How I've indulged you. I have let you show him
What you can do one way against him : now
Remember he's your father. You'll strive with me ?
But you shan't reach him.

PHOENIX.

Let him keep quiet, then.

QUEEN. I'll see to that. And after all, there are
hurts

Not easily borne. You might expect from him
A gusty speech or two. You ruffled at him
To think he merely tried on you the thing
You have done perfectly to him.

PHOENIX.

I'll have it

Simple and downright now in yes or no :
Did you know of it ?

QUEEN.

What, it's my turn now ?

Why, if the wind should change, what a frightening
face

Phoenix

You'd go about with !—Did I know of it ?

PHOENIX. Did you ?

QUEEN. I've known of queer things in
my time ;

Which of them all am I to confess to now ?

PHOENIX. You knew about—Rhodope and that
man ?

QUEEN. Well, it is like explaining things to a child.
Soon as you think you are plain, back you are swerved
To the beginning again.—And a dangerous child !
This would have put a handsome end to it,
If after I had so keenly planned it out
And coaxed the whole event into my pattern,
You flared into a murder, and lost me everything !

PHOENIX. But you are worse than he is ! You
knew the girl

Was for his use, and set me on to love her ?

QUEEN. I never set you on. I saw the way
You meant to go, and would not hold you back :
Why should I ?—It was too ridiculous,
The sight of him charming the girl ! The man
Who goes downstairs peering for his footing
And upstairs with a trouble you can hear—

Phoenix

He to be awkwardly languishing after her,
Blandly priding himself on every look
Her sham love gave him, in between the whiles
She had to turn away for laughing at him !—
If you were there, he would see past mistake
How girls like her are kindled ! And you were
Plunging to be there ! Why should I stop you,
When you would show him up even to himself
The piece of elderly innocence I saw him ?
And don't make out you are another piece
Of innocence ! You could see well enough
Who must be shoulder'd out of his place in the game
To make room for your venture.

PHOENIX (*to* AMYNTOR). Dirt wins, you said.
You were right ; and thank you for it.

(*To the* QUEEN). I could have sworn,
When I came back from hunting, I had found
The life for me. As simple as the feeling
Of my own eagerness, it was in my mind
Why trees are so delighted to be green
When they are sunning themselves. I could live
then,
And love to be alive, on the same terms

Phoenix

As trees drink light, and winds are hasty and showers
Stately, leaving the hills where they alighted.
I wanted nothing more ; and that is the life
You've killed in me. You twined and plaited me
In with your malice as easily as straw ;
But now I see what you have done with me.
I know to what detestable places life,
Speaking like an angel, can persuade me.
You taught me that, and I will pay you for it
The only way I can : I will leave you.

QUEEN. But have some thought for me. I'm not
the wife
Who minds her household while the husband's off
Sweethearting ; and the wives whose luck has held
Clack at her name, breathless with relishing pity.
He's mine, and mine he shall be : let him watch it.
I've never yet been gossip for the women.
And his first fling away from me must be
At home ! Daring me to my face he'd start
His gay old age ! As if I'd let him think
He was the man when you, Phoenix, were by !

PHOENIX. No more of you. You have made me
ashamed.

Phoenix

Never again will the roof that houses you
Be shelter over me.

AMYNTOR. I am amused
At this. (*To PHOENIX.*) There's nothing has toucht
 you, to stir
The hate in you like mine. (*To the QUEEN.*) So it
 was you
Roused the calf's blood ?—It is a thing to cherish ;
Never while I can look on you will I
Forget to foster this.—But the jest is
The way the son thanks his contriving mother
For the sweet hours she helpt him to !

QUEEN. Have done !
You've been the mischief here from first to last,
You with your rage to be booby to a girl ;
And now you'll turn Phoenix against me, will you ?
You'll finish off the scorn you've thought out for
 me

By pestering my boy out of the house ?
(*To PHOENIX.*) Never heed him. Let a few quiet
 hours

Go by, and you'll be asking what could set
The notion stirring in you, to leave here.

Phoenix

PHOENIX. You do not know what I have lost, nor
how

The gash has torn me. It is no wound for time
To close in a callous scar ; and I'll not live
Gathering hatred round the sense of it.
I'll go, and never be reminded of you.—
And for a sheen of beauty gleaming thin
As glare a white cloud casts on rotten mire,
I sold my heart ! How can such heavenly light
Live on the lying wantonness of women ?

AMYNTOR. And you are one to be nice about her,
you
The boy who stole into his father's love !

QUEEN. But let me come on her now ! Let me pay
My debts to her now, when no worshipping man
Will fend for her prettily blossoming skin ! You'll
see

How long the heavenly light will stay with her.

AMYNTOR. Keep out ! You're nothing here.
This is all mine ;
And I have promised it to my whip to deal with.

QUEEN. Ay, and where is she ? Have you thought
of that ?

Phoenix

AMYNTOR. What are you fancying now ?

QUEEN. Well, where is she ?

Not by herself, I am sure : she is not one
For going lonely. But not with you or Phoenix !
Where then ?

AMYNTOR. In hiding, I dare say.

QUEEN. And who's

The lucky man this time ?

AMYNTOR. What man ?

QUEEN. The man

In hiding with her.

AMYNTOR. What is the nonsense now ?

Phoenix and I are here.

QUEEN. That's what I say :

And she's not here. My turn to be amused.

AMYNTOR. What breeding minds old women
have ! We're deep

In shame enough here, without your inventions.

QUEEN. I'm sorry. I forgot how well you know
her.

It was a little careless of her, to be
So kind to both of you ; but you can count
At least on keeping her in the family.

Phoenix

AMYNTOR (*to PHOENIX*). What have you done with her ?

PHOENIX. Why, I came here
Looking for her.

AMYNTOR. This is the silliest whimsy.
I will not let it goad me.

QUEEN (*calling up to the soldiers*). Have you seen,
Sentinels there, the girl that the King bought
Of the Sidonian pirates ?

1ST SOLDIER. She was up here
Yesterday.

QUEEN. What ! With you ?

1ST SOLDIER. No, no : I mean
Where you are now, my lady.

2ND SOLDIER. I saw her too.

QUEEN. Yes, but to-day, you lout.

1ST SOLDIER. O, has she been
Up here to-day ?

QUEEN. Anywhere have you seen her ?
Up here, or out-of-doors below ?

1ST SOLDIER. I'll swear
She has not left the palace.

2ND SOLDIER. Is she lost ?

Phoenix

If you search through the building now, before
She can slip out, you're bound to come across her.

QUEEN. Then you've not seen her?

1ST SOLDIER.

Not to-day.

2ND SOLDIER.

Nor me.

RHODOPE (*giggles*).

QUEEN. Ha, ha! Now who was in the right?

But this

Is better than anything I could have guesst:

Trust her to be perfection in her kind!

The lightest-going fancy will be founder'd

Before it can catch up with her.—Come down!

You must not hide: you are to be admired.—

And now at last, my pair of simpletons,

You'll see what you were treasuring.—Bring her
down!

(RHODOPE comes down, followed by 1ST
SOLDIER; 2ND SOLDIER comes half-way
down his steps to look on.)

RHODOPE. Mind the lion!—Well, what surly
faces!

You might be hunting me in deadly earnest!

QUEEN. What took you there?

Phoenix

PHOENIX. Why don't you whip her? What are you waiting for?

RHODOPE. So your love's out of breath? Indeed, young men

Cannot stay like their elders.

AMYNTOR.

Then you think

I will not whip you?

RHODOPE.

Well, it would be unjust.

AMYNTOR. Unjust?

RHODOPE.

It would, after the way I've taken Care of you. Last night, now: you did not know,

But Phoenix, in this very place—ay, yonder!—He would have sat on you if I'd not stopt him.

QUEEN. How long is she to go on? Give me the whip.

I will not let her impudence put off

My reckoning. Look at her dimpling there!

I am the talk of the country. It must be

Despising mockery that will shake my heart

Like swallowed poison, if anyone calls me now

Wife or mother: she has done that, and stands

Mincing there as easy and sweet about it

Phoenix

As if it were the forfeit in a game.
And is it nothing, what she has done to you,
Amyntor, and you, Phoenix? Has she left
No stinging touch of her skill festering in you?
What do you seem now to each other? Kind
As once you were—as father and son might be?
What do you seem now to yourselves?—It is
Her doing: her clever work, all of it,
As deep in you as it has gone.

RHODOPE.

My doing?

I have done nothing at all. I'm not so old
I have to work for this to happen round me.
I'm simply here or there; and all the rest
The men do for themselves—crowd to do it.
Why should I trouble, if they will keep on?

QUEEN. Right! You are nothing—nothing but
your looks!

I do believe there is no evil in you.
You have no ruinous art, no skilful lust:
You have your skin. Let there be sight of it
And handling of it, you are a wild-fire joy,
Unspeakably desired: mind and spirit
Fawn on you adoring.—Give me the whip!

Phoenix

RHODOPE. How can I help it?—Tell me why I
should want

To help it, when it is my delight?—But I
Never askt anyone to quarrel about me.
They will take things so seriously, these men!
They make a lot of earnest nonsense up
And talk it at me, when we might be playing;
Then in a crack they're at each other's throats,
And I am to blame if anyone's hurt!—But why
Must there be all this flustering work about
The simplest easiest pleasure in the world?
Why can't they be like me, the men that love me?

PHOENIX. Well, now we have come to something
firm at last

After these crazes: firm and calm as a rock
When laughing sunny wind drives the water
To tear itself to surges to possess it;
And all the sea can do, as it lunges by,
Is to disguise the rock's insensible nature
In rearing glittering flights of spray, as white
And vanishing as love's imagination.

RHODOPE. Now there it is. That is the way they talk.
They will have everything so serious!

Phoenix

PHOENIX. You are right. It is our fault. But I have done.

Your wisdom lights upon me somewhat rudely,
And it may cost me yet a stagger or two
To bear it. But you speak an honesty
Which I can understand ; and it is to you
That I will say, with all my heart, farewell. (*Exit.*)

RHODOPE. Why, I believe he would come round to me yet.

QUEEN. Lash at her, lash at her now ! Catch her, while

Her wantonness is grinning, into anguish,
And let me see how she will dimple screaming !
What, are you stupefied again with her ?
I'll ply it for you.

AMYNTOR (*throws the whip down*). No ; no whipping.

QUEEN. Not ?

Do you not understand ? We have lost Phoenix !
That was a trifling squall, the jealousy
That bluster'd in between you and the boy :
A squall that blows grit in your eyes might be
More troublesome ; both of you now have seen

Phoenix

The slut is common.—But what is it she does
That draws the spirit out of a man and leaves him
Hollow for her to play on, as a lad
Draws pith from a stalk to make a whistle of it ?
She turns her eyes on you, and there's an end
Of whipping ! Do you think Phoenix will come
back ?

I know him better : for all he'll be to us now
She might have murder'd him ! And there she
stands

Facing me down, delighted with her work,
And you, his father, will not have her feel
A stroke for it !

AMYNTOR. Not a stroke. You would be pleased.
Reason enough why she shall not be toucht.

QUEEN. And what is she to have, then ?

AMYNTOR. What she deserves :
Contempt. We throw discarded meat to dogs.
She thought herself a feast for a King. The King
Has tasted her ; and gives her to his soldiers.
They shall devour her.

RHODOPE. (*Smiles at 1ST SOLDIER.*) That one first.

QUEEN. Dear fool,

Phoenix

You send her to the stars, living to heaven !
Are you rewarding her because she has
Endured your love ?

AMYNTOR. O, end it as you will
So long as it is ended. Rid me of her,
And let me have some peace.

QUEEN. Then we will sell her.

AMYNTOR. The very thing. See to it. I am too
tired.

It will be at a loss ; but sold she shall be.
I'll know then she is out of reach : and mind
You never even hint where she has gone.

RHODOPE. I'm sure that will be best. I'd never
feel

Quite at my ease here now. You ought to sell me.
But I hope all the Kings round here are not
Kept in so strictly. And if it could be managed,
Don't sell me to a King who's very old !

AMYNTOR. Take her away.

QUEEN. Why must it be a King ?
(Exit with RHODOPE.)

AMYNTOR. But somebody shall smart ! (to 1ST
SOLDIER). And you will do.

Phoenix

Where is my whip ? I am not blaming you :
Nothing to me, where you may choose to drab.
But I must let my torment loose on someone.
Come on : we'll do it thoroughly and gravely.

CURTAIN

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